

February 6th, 2008

Sen. McCaskill's Bill (S. 2177) Wants to Eliminate the Business of Paid Line Standing.

After arriving in Washington earlier this year and seeing linestanders within the halls of Congress, Senator Claire McCaskill has proposed banning the practice. She feels that allowing registered lobbyists to pay people to stand in line on their behalf is a corruption of the legislative process. She feels that it grants lobbyists "pay to play" access. She also feels that it shuts non-lobbyists out of proceedings meant to be public.

Up until about twenty years ago, corporations, trade associations, and lobbying groups would send their staff members to personally line up for all hearings on Capitol Hill. The majority of hearings at the House and Senate are held in rooms large enough to accommodate every member of the public wishing to attend. Starting in the 1980s, as the practice of using on-demand messenger services to exchange documents with Capitol Hill grew, some resourceful lobbyists began using these same messenger services to arrive early for hearings and hold places in line outside hearing rooms.

Whenever proposed legislation had a pronounced effect on commerce or industry, the persons following the bill want to see not just the person testifying or the person asking questions, but the reactions of all the committee members. It's not unlike the difference between watching a hockey game live vs. on TV. To fully appreciate the game, you need to do more than simply watch the puck. On Capitol Hill, you get a better sense of the tenor of the proceedings by being there.

There is no lobbying going on at committee hearings. Lobbyists aren't allowed to speak. Lobbyists and industry representatives are there to gather information, and to anticipate effects of proposed legislation. They often have a huge vested interest in the outcome of the proceedings. Many proposed bills, if enacted, have an enormous economic impact on all sorts of industries. As laws, they affect profits, job growth, American competitiveness, and international trade. No member of congress would ever suggest that they do not consider the impact of legislation on commerce. Without input from industry, Congress couldn't do its job. It is up to each representative to consider the position of their constituents and balance that against the needs of industry.

Enacting this bill and forcing the lobbyists to “Get in Line” themselves would not change their need to get into these hearings. By eliminating an industry that employs hundreds of entry-level workers, and instead creating positions for even more lobbyists, the bill would have the opposite effect of that intended. It wouldn’t change the composition of who ultimately sat in hearing rooms; it would simply increase costs for all involved.

Henry Ford used the assembly line to improve efficiency and create an enormous industry. Each worker on the line was responsible for his/her specific task. We provide linestanders, and they do that job well. The persons who observe hearings are skilled at taking in and analyzing all the testimony. The Senators and Congressmen are good at balancing out everything they hear, separating the wheat from the chaff, and making an informed decision. When a citizen writes a letter to his or her Senator, it would be great to get a personal reply back, penned by the Senator. Instead, there are persons working in every office on the Hill, writing correspondence. Division of labor makes America a great place to work. Linestanding may seem like a strange practice, but it’s ultimately an honest job in a free-market economy.

Mark Gross

Owner

Quick Messenger Service/ Linestanding.com